



# Older. Wiser. Responsible.

HIV and Older Adults:  
Staying Healthy with HIV



## **HIV and older adults: staying healthy with HIV**

This booklet:

- Describes why more people over age 50 are being infected with HIV.
- Explains how HIV affects the body — and how it can complicate other illnesses that often affect older people.
- Explains why it's important to get medical treatment as soon as possible after being diagnosed with HIV.
- Talks about other problems that can affect your HIV treatment — like depression, stigma, and isolation — and how to cope with them.

## **More people over age 50 are infected with HIV/AIDS**

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS, is becoming much more common among people over age 50. The number of people over age 50 who have HIV or AIDS is growing quickly.

Many will get infected because they don't understand how HIV is transmitted and how to protect themselves. Others were infected at a younger age and are living longer because medical treatment for HIV/AIDS is improving.

As a person over age 50, how can you fight HIV and stay healthy?

## **What your HIV test results mean**

When you “test positive” for HIV, that means you have the HIV virus in your body. You may feel healthy at the time — most people with HIV do not become sick for 7 to 10 years. Some people over age 50 were infected a long time ago without knowing it.

If you have just been diagnosed with HIV:

- **Tell your sex partners or needle-sharing partners you are infected.** They should know so they can get tested for HIV and get medical help if they need it. Ask your doctor or medical provider about services that can help you inform your partner.
- **Get medical care right away.** Don't wait until you are sick — make an appointment to see a medical provider. Try to find one who has experience treating people with HIV. The provider who did your HIV test will schedule your first medical appointment for you — so be sure you follow-up.



## **Work with a doctor or health care provider**

The first step is to have a complete physical exam to see how HIV is affecting your body. An exam will help find other health problems that might affect your HIV treatment.

Your doctor will use two main tests to measure how HIV affects your body:

**Viral load:** This test measures the amount of HIV virus in your body. The goal is to get your viral load as low as possible by taking HIV medications.

**CD4 cell count:** This test measures the level of CD4 cells in your body. CD4 cells help your body's immune system fight off infections. HIV kills these cells. The goal is to keep your CD4 cell count as high as possible by taking HIV medications.

## Taking HIV medications

HIV medications can help restore the health of your immune system. Your doctor or health care provider will help you decide when to start taking these drugs. Most doctors want patients to start taking HIV medications before their immune systems become weak. You and your doctor will decide together when to start taking medications.

For HIV medications to be effective, you must take them on time, every day, in the amount (dosage) your doctor prescribes. If you miss too many dosages, your body will reject the drug. This is called *resistance*. Once you become resistant to an HIV drug, you cannot use it again.

If you take medications for other illnesses, they may mix with your HIV medications and cause problems (side effects). HIV medications by themselves can cause side effects, too. Talk with your medical provider about all your health problems and any medications you take — including over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, herbs, or supplements.

## Aging and your immune system

Your body's immune system helps fight off infections. The strength of your immune system declines in old age, even if you are healthy. When you have HIV as an older person, your immune system will lose more CD4 cells than a younger person. If you take HIV medications on schedule, you have a better chance of keeping your immune system healthy.

## Diseases are a natural part of aging

HIV medications are helping people with HIV live longer, healthier lives. But, as people with HIV grow older, they have the same health problems as many adults — diabetes, heart disease, liver and kidney disease, and cancer. Some of these health problems overlap with HIV and can make your treatment more complicated. Symptoms of HIV disease can also be confused with other diseases.



## **Basic steps you can take to stay healthy with HIV**

- **Quit smoking:** As people with HIV live longer and continue to smoke, they increase their risk of developing smoking-related health problems. Quitting smoking is probably the most important step you can take to improve your health.
- **Get help for drug/alcohol problems.**
- **Eat a healthy diet and try to exercise regularly.**
- **Always wear a condom when you have sex to protect yourself and others.**
- **Get treated for hepatitis C and get a vaccination for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.**

The chart on the next page lists common health problems for adults with HIV (left column). The right column has tips for treating those health problems and staying healthy.

## HIV, HIV medications, and common health problems

## Things you can do to stay healthy

**High cholesterol:** Many people see a rise in their “bad” cholesterol — low-density lipoprotein (LDL) and triglycerides — when they start taking HIV medications.

- Statins and other drugs to lower cholesterol can be used carefully, if your doctor agrees.
- Exercise and eat a healthy diet with plenty of fiber.

**Diabetes:** Diabetes occurs when the body cannot control its blood sugar. It can lead to many health problems. HIV neuropathy (nerve damage) is similar to diabetic neuropathy.

- Keep your weight down through diet and exercise.
- Insulin injections can level out your blood sugar.
- Quit smoking. Talk with your doctor about switching HIV medications because some of them can increase your risk of diabetes.

**Kidney (renal) disease:** The HIV virus itself and some HIV medications can harm your kidneys. HIV-associated nephropathy is a common kidney disease in people with HIV.

- Get regular tests of your kidney function.
- Try to keep your blood pressure low.
- Drink plenty of water, cut down on salt, and eat a healthy diet.

**Hepatitis/liver problems:** Your liver filters out wastes from your blood and produces chemicals that keep your body functioning. HIV can cause the liver to over-produce these chemicals. Some HIV medications also can harm your liver. Hepatitis C causes the most liver damage and affects many people with HIV. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

- Cut down on alcohol or don’t drink at all.
- Don’t inject drugs or share injection equipment.
- Get a vaccine (shot) for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.
- Taking medications for both hepatitis C and HIV can be complicated. Your doctor may want to treat the hepatitis C first.
- Get tested regularly for liver health.

**Cancer:** Having HIV and a weakened immune system makes it easier for other viruses to live in your body. HIV and other viruses appear to work together to help cancer cells start growing. People with HIV have higher rates of lung cancer, anal cancer, liver cancer, skin cancer, cervical cancer, and Hodgkin’s lymphoma than people who are not infected.

- Get screened for specific cancers, especially if you have a family history of any type of cancer.
- Screenings include a Pap smear for cervical cancer, chest x-rays for lung cancer, and anal Pap smear for anal cancer.
- Exercise, quit smoking, and eat foods that can help prevent cancers.



## **Can I still have sex?**

Older people with HIV are still having sex. But older adults may need to learn how to protect themselves and their partners from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Many don't realize they are at risk. Women who are too old to become pregnant and their partners may think they don't need to use a condom — the best way to prevent HIV and STD transmission.

### **Keep these things in mind BEFORE you have sex:**

- Use a condom the correct way each time you have sex. However, condoms cannot totally protect you from certain STDs.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs when you have sex. They can make you forget, or not care about, using a condom.
- Ask your partner about his/her HIV status. Be upfront and tell your partner you have HIV.
- Anal sex is the most risky form of unprotected sex.
- If you use erectile dysfunction (ED) drugs (Viagra<sup>®</sup>, Cialis<sup>®</sup>), use them carefully and only as prescribed. Don't mix these drugs with nitrates ("poppers."). It can lower your blood pressure to a dangerous level

## **Drug and alcohol use**

Alcohol and drugs can impair your judgment and put you at risk for HIV transmission. When you are high, you may engage in risky sexual behavior or get into unsafe situations.

About 1 of every 4 people with HIV also has the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Most of these people were infected with HCV by sharing drug injection equipment. HIV and HCV co-infection is very hard on your liver and kidneys. Cutting down on drugs and alcohol, or quitting them altogether, is the best way to fight co-infection. Liver and kidney health often declines during old age – even in healthy people. By quitting alcohol and drugs, you can protect your liver and kidneys from further damage.

## **Protect yourself from other STDs**

HIV is one of several sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) you can get from having unprotected sex. Some STDs can be treated and cured. Other STDs are like HIV — they are “chronic” (long-term) diseases that cannot be cured or prevented.

Even if you use a condom during sex, the condom may not cover all of the area infected by an STD and you could become infected. Ask your partner upfront whether he or she has any STDs.

An STD called human papillomavirus (HPV) is a big concern for women. It is the most common cause of cervical cancer. Having HIV and HPV at the same time allows cervical cancer to grow faster. Women should have regular Pap smears to screen for cervical cancer and HPV.



## **Depression and isolation can hold you back — Don't go it alone**

Many people over age 50 feel discriminated against and feel shame (stigma) because of their HIV disease. They may not tell others about their HIV status — even friends or family members.

Living alone and being isolated can hold back your HIV treatment. People with HIV who are socially isolated are more likely to be depressed. When you are depressed, you are more likely to skip your medications or miss medical appointments. Depression can even make physical problems worse. Don't be afraid to reach out to friends, family members, and caregivers for support.

## **Learn more about HIV and aging**

### **New York State Department of Health HIV/AIDS hotline and website**

1-800-541-AIDS (2437) (English)

1-800-233-SIDA (7432) (Spanish)

[www.health.ny.gov/diseases/aids](http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/aids)

### **New York State HIV/AIDS TDD Information Line**

1-800-369-2437. Voice callers can use the New York Relay:

Dial 711 or 1-800-421-1220 and ask the operator to dial 1-800-369-2437.

### **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

CDC has a range of materials on HIV/AIDS and people over age 50.

[www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/over50/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/over50/index.htm)

1-800-458-5231

### **ACRIA (AIDS Community Research Initiative of America)**

ACRIA has several excellent publications on aging and HIV.

[www.acria.org](http://www.acria.org)

### **SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment)**

SAGE is a national group that provides HIV/AIDS-related services and advocacy for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender elders.

<http://www.sageusa.org/index.cfm>



[health.ny.gov/SexNeverGetsOld](https://health.ny.gov/SexNeverGetsOld)